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ABSTRACT

An anonymous survey was used to assess high school counselors' ratings of the importance of various college choice factors they advise students to consider when selecting a college. Counselors were also asked to rate a Carnegie Research I institution relative to other colleges in the state with respect to these college choice factors. The findings from the 138 respondents from a western state indicate that counselors considered quality of undergraduate education, quality of faculty, tuition, accessibility, helpfulness of faculty and staff, and class size to be the most important college choice factors. The Carnegie Research I institution was ranked favorably on variety of majors, prestige of the degree, extracurricular activities, diversity of students, and undergraduate research opportunities. Overall, counselors rated the flagship institution more favorably on factors they considered of lesser importance and less favorably on those factors they deemed to be of greater significance as they advised students. Collectively, these findings raise concerns for this state's flagship university, concerns that are likely to apply to other flagships, given their nature (i.e., research focus, large size). Counselors may well be steering prospective undergraduate students away from Research I institutions, which they perceive as large and unresponsive. This highlights the need for Research I institutions to think about their image in two markets with conflicting values. On one hand, these institutions must focus their attentions on research issues, such as attracting prolific faculty, attracting research grants, and building endowments. Simultaneously, however, they must regard prospective undergraduate students and the groups that influence them as an equally important market, especially given the increasing alignment of state allocations with student enrollments. (Contains 2 tables and 16 references.) (Author/SLD)

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The Importance of College Choice Factors from the Perspective of High School Counselors

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Abstract

An anonymous survey was used to assess high school counselors' ratings of the importance of various college choice factors they advise students to consider when selecting a college. Counselors were also asked to rate a Carnegie Research I institution relative to other colleges in the state with respect to these college choice factors. The findings indicate that counselors considered quality of undergraduate education, quality of faculty, tuition, accessibility and helpfulness of faculty and staff, and class size to be the most important college choice factors. The Carnegie Research I institution was ranked favorably on variety of majors, prestige of the degree, extracurricular activities, diversity of students, and undergraduate research opportunities. Overall, counselors rated the flagship institution more favorably on factors that they consider of lesser importance and less favorably on those factors that they deem to be of greater significance as they advise students. Collectively, these findings raise concerns for this state's flagship university, concerns that likely apply to other flagships given their nature (i.e., research focus, large size). Counselors may well be steering prospective undergraduate students away from Research I institutions, which they perceive as large and unresponsive. This highlights the need for Research I institutions to think about their image in two markets with conflicting values. On one hand, these institutions must focus their attentions on research issues such as attracting prolific faculty, attracting research grants, and building endowments. Simultaneously, however, they must regard prospective undergraduate students, and the groups that influence them, as an equally important market, especially given the increasing alignment of state allocations with student enrollments.

Introduction

As state funding for colleges and universities is increasingly being tied to enrollment levels, higher educational institutions across the United States are feeling economic pressures to maintain or increase their student enrollments or face the unpleasant task of making large budget cuts (Breneman & Finney, 1997; Dennis, 1998). Attracting students has also become increasingly competitive with the emergence of for-profit institutions offering more flexible degree programs and programs via new technological media (Swensen, 1998; Winston, 1999). At the same time, students have begun to assert their own views about education and credentialing and are less apt to accept traditional programs without question (Boyer, 1998).

In response to these pressures, there have been expanded efforts by higher educational institutions to understand and influence the college choice process among prospective students. Efforts include more targeted advertisement and promotional materials, telemarketing initiatives, increased visits to local high schools, as well as general efforts to position the institution with respect to competitors in the minds of prospective students and their parents. Institutions have also attempted to court the support of high school counselors with the expectation that this constituency can exert a critical influence on the college choice decision. While the opinions of these constituents may not be influential to all prospective students, these educational professionals are uniquely positioned in high schools to shape the early perceptions of students about their higher educational options, particularly in-state ones. Thus, it is imperative that institutions of higher education are aware of the attitudes of this group and are prepared to court their support in the long-term interests of enrollment management. This study

provides insight into the attitudes and perspectives of high school counselors who influence prospective students during the search phase of their college selection process.

The College Choice Process

In recent years, researchers have devoted considerable attention to the issue of college choice (Braxton, 1990). Building on the work of Jackson (1982), Litten (1982) and others, Hossler and Gallagher (1987) created a three-stage model to describe the college decision-making process. This conceptual framework proposes that there are three stages during which students make their college choice. These stages include a pre-disposition stage, a search stage and a choice stage.

In the predisposition stage, students determine whether they will continue their formal education beyond high school. According to this model, the predisposition to attend college is influenced by student characteristics, the attitudes of significant others and a student's educational activities. Most students enter the search stage of the college decision-making process during their junior year of high school. In this stage, students begin to consider their various options in terms of colleges and universities, as well as vocational and non-traditional college options. There is evidence that students narrow their options geographically first, then consider specific academic programs among the colleges remaining in their choice set (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987).

Students enter the choice stage when they submit applications to a small set of colleges. During the choice stage, which for most students occurs during the senior year, students consider many factors such as academic reputation, costs, and location, and ultimately decide what college they will attend (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987).

This study focuses on the search stage of the college choice process. During this stage, high school counselors are well-positioned to exert an important influence on the attitudes of students and parents. This study will examine what factors high school counselors consider most important in selecting a college as well as their attitudes toward a Carnegie Research I institution with regard to these factors.

The Influence of High School Counselors on College Selection

The research regarding the extent to which high school counselors influence college choice is mixed. While there is evidence that some high school counselors are overburdened with "administrivia" and others are not sufficiently informed to support students during the search process (Matthay, 1989), most studies report that at least some prospective students seek information about colleges from their high school counselors. Estimates regarding the number of students who seek information and advice from this group range from 16% to 92% (Chapman, DeMasi, & O'Brien, 1987; Gilmour, Spiro, & Dolich, 1981; Johnson, Stewart, & Eberly, 1991; Martin, 1996; Martin & Dixon, 1991; Matthay, 1989).

Chapman et al. (1987) report that, on average, students have at least three to five contacts with their high school counselor during their junior and senior years. Similarly, Johnson et al. (1991) state that approximately 70% of surveyed college students used their high school counselor as a source of information, and 60% attained the information they sought. Surveyed students report that when meeting with their high school counselor they seek college advising, financial aid information, and academic counseling

(Chapman et al., 1987). In one study, surveyed high school counselors and their principals described the college advising offered at their schools as very effective (Chapman & DeMasi, 1984).

While there is no consensus on the magnitude of the influence that high school counselors have on the opinions of prospective students on college choice, it is clear that a sufficient number of counselors do have some influence in this area. This warrants further inquiry into their attitudes with regard to these issues.

Research Questions

This study focuses on the attitudes of high school counselors toward one flagship university in a western state. The emphasis of this study was to acquire an understanding of the attitudes of high school counselors in this region with respect to this Carnegie Research I institution in order to gain insight into the possible messages communicated to students and parents. The assumption was that while high school counselors are obviously not the only source of information, their perspectives have some influence on the opinions of prospective students and their parents. Specifically, this study seeks to answer two questions:

(1) What factors do counselors weigh most heavily during college choice advisement, and

(2) How do they rate this flagship university on these factors relative to other colleges and universities in the state?

Methods

Sample

In the winter of 1997, anonymous surveys were mailed to 332 high school counselors representing 124 high schools in one western state. The response rate was 41%, which resulted from 138 surveys being completed and returned. Among the survey respondents, 57% were female and 43% were male. Approximately 63% of the respondents were from high schools located within a 50 mile radius of the campus. Nearly all of the respondents (95%) reported providing regular counseling services to juniors and seniors. These counselors reported providing college advising to an average of 163 students each year. In addition, 20% of the counselors reported receiving their undergraduate degree from the campus studied in this survey, whereas, 22% reported earning a graduate degree at this campus. Approximately 64% of the respondents reported visiting the campus for professional reasons at least annually.

The demographics of the respondents are consistent with those of all counselors in the state in that the majority of counselors are female and are concentrated in large schools located in suburban/urban settings near the university campus. The similarity in demographics supports the population validity of the sample.

Variables and Measures

The survey instrument was developed by reviewing the literature to identify those factors most often cited as important by prospective college students when making their college choice decision. The first set of twenty-two questions asked counselors to rate the importance of various college choice factors they advised students to consider when

selecting a college using a five-point Likert scale (1=not important, 3=somewhat important, 5=very important). The second portion of the survey included twenty-one questions asking counselors to rate the flagship university with regard to these college choice factors compared to other colleges and universities in the state. That is, they were asked to indicate how well the university compared on these college choice factors relative to other in-state higher educational institutions. Once again, a five-point Likert scale was utilized for the ratings (1=less appealing, 3=about the same, 5=more appealing). In this study, the Carnegie Research I institution was being compared to ten other colleges and universities in the state.

With the first set of questions, the twenty-two questions asking counselors to rate the importance of various factors they advised students to consider when selecting a college, a principal component factor analysis with a varimax rotation was run. The following five factors resulted:

(1) Quality and responsiveness of personnel (4 items, e.g., accessibility and helpfulness of faculty);

(2) Research I indicators (6 items, e.g., undergraduate research opportunities; national reputation);

(3) Extracurricular/social opportunities (4 items, e.g., social life; athletic programs);

(4) Economic considerations (3 items, e.g., tuition, work opportunities in school); and

(5) Size (2 items, e.g., campus and classes).

Please refer to Appendix A for a complete list of the individual items comprising each variable.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were calculated on all individual items as well as the above five factors to identify what issues counselors consider to be the most important when they advise students in the college selection process and how they rate the Research I institution in this study relative to ten other in-state colleges on the same college choice factors. The results are reported below.

Results

Rank ordered means of the individual items indicated that counselors considered quality of undergraduate education, quality of faculty, tuition, accessibility and helpfulness of faculty, accessibility and helpfulness of staff, and class size to be the most important college choice factors respectively. The least important college choice factors included undergraduate research opportunities, athletic programs, diversity of students, extracurricular activities, social life, and prestige of the degree (see Table One).

The mean ratings of the five college choice factors were: (1) Quality and responsiveness of personnel, 4.42; (2) Economic considerations, 4.03; (3) Size, 3.85; (4) Research I indicators, 3.60; and (5) Extracurricular/social opportunities, 3.27 (see Table Two). The factor considered most important by high school counselors, the quality and responsiveness of personnel, was comprised of the individual items of quality of undergraduate education, quality of faculty, and the accessibility and helpfulness of faculty and staff. The factor labeled economic considerations was rated nearly as important and included work opportunities while in school, location of the campus, and

tuition. The factor labeled size included questions centered on class size and counselor preference for large versus small campuses. Rated less important by high school counselors were choice factors related to Research I indicators. This factor included variety of majors, national reputation of the campus, undergraduate research opportunities, diversity of students, and prestige of the degree. Finally, rated least important was the factor associated with extracurricular/social opportunities, which included involvement in leadership opportunities, extracurricular activities, social life and athletic programs.

The mean ratings of the flagship compared to other campuses with regard to the five factors were: (1) Research I indicators, 3.81; (2) Economic considerations, 3.33; (3) Extracurricular/social opportunities, 3.24; (4) Quality and responsiveness of personnel, 3.21; and (5) Size, 2.51. Thus, the state's flagship university, relative to other in-state colleges and universities, was ranked highest on the factor related to Research I indicators. The second highest rating included choice factors related to the economic considerations of college attendance, while choice factors related to extracurricular/social opportunities were rated third. As highlighted in Table Two, these high school counselors tended to rate the flagship university higher on those college choice factors they consider less important, and lower on those factors they deem most important.

When comparing ratings on the five factors, the state's flagship was rated relatively low on the quality and responsiveness of personnel (quality of undergraduate education, quality of faculty, accessibility and helpfulness of faculty and staff). A closer examination of the specific ratings of items within this factor revealed that most counselors rated the campus about the same as other campuses on all measures except the accessibility and helpfulness of faculty. Specifically, 20% of all counselors in the sample rated the flagship less appealing than other campuses on this item. Thus, the relatively low rating of the quality and responsiveness of personnel was due almost exclusively to counselor perceptions of the extent to which faculty provided support to the learning experiences of undergraduate students. Among those counselors who rated this factor low (n=27), 21% attended the flagship as undergraduates, and 24% attended as graduates, most likely to attain their degree in Counseling. In addition, 64% of this group reported that they visited the flagship at least annually for professional reasons, and 86% reported working at high school campuses located within 50 miles of the flagship campus. In other words, some counselors who appear to be very familiar with this institution still rate it less favorably.

While a relatively small group of alumni counselors did rate the flagship campus lower in the areas noted above, the overall rankings of alums of the flagship reveal that in general they rated the campus significantly higher on all factors except size than counselors who graduated from other schools ($p<.05$). In particular, the mean ratings of counselors who had earned undergraduate degrees at the flagship with respect to the factors were: (1) Research I indicators, 3.90; (2) Economic considerations, 3.47; (3) Extracurricular/social opportunities, 3.37; (4) Quality and responsiveness of personnel,

3.36; and, (5) Size, 2.52. Similarly, high school counselors who earned graduate degrees at the flagship also rated the flagship significantly higher than other campuses on all factors except size (a small group of counselors earned both their undergraduate and graduate degrees at the flagship).

On factors related to campus size (class size and the counselor's preference for large versus small campuses), the flagship received the lowest ratings. It is clear that in general, counselors in this sample viewed the large size of the flagship campus as detrimental to the undergraduate experience of students who attend. This rating was also apt to be lower the farther counselors' high schools were located from the flagship campus. This is an important finding in that counselors in general rated class size the sixth most important individual college choice factor. It is of further significance because a greater distance from the campus is indicative of a rural setting. Thus, counselors working in rural areas see a large campus as more problematic for their students.

Discussion

The results of this study reveal an interesting interplay between the mission of a Carnegie Research I institution and the expectations of high school counselors. It is clear from the attitudes reported by high school counselors that the strengths of the Research I mission are at odds with what counselors value. The findings of this study raise concerns for this state's Research I university, concerns that likely apply to other Research I universities given their nature.

Carnegie Research I institutions are defined as those that award doctoral degrees, give a high priority to research, and receive large amounts of federal aid to support their

research agendas. While most institutions can claim to have strong scholars within their departments, research institutions are defined by the caliber and productivity of their faculty. These institutions reward faculty primarily through the quality and volume of their research. While teaching undergraduates is important in the evaluation of faculty at these institutions, it is of less importance to promotion and tenure than their research activities. In addition, faculty who generate external funding based on their research are particularly valued at these types of campuses. The recognition and prestige that the institution enjoys based on extramural grants, in addition to the additional funding, help position the institution favorably with respect to other similar institutions nationally. This, in turn, helps the campus attract more prolific faculty and more prestigious grants.

In addition, Carnegie Research I institutions often attract a more diverse student body than other types of campuses. They are attractive to international graduate students and very often are more proactive in their communities in attempting to attract more domestic students from racial and ethnic minority groups. Many Carnegie Research I institutions enroll large numbers of working students who commute to campus. Moreover, public research universities tend to have larger campuses than other types of institutions. Their enrollments typically include proportionately larger numbers of undergraduate students who help support smaller graduate and professional classes.

Ironically, while the focus of these universities is centered on scholarly excellence and entrepreneurial research, they may simultaneously project an image of an institutional culture that does not value and nurture undergraduate students. This image is often magnified when campuses are large, when undergraduate teaching is conducted in part by graduate teaching assistants, and when undergraduate student populations are

comprised of large numbers of commuter students who are disconnected from the student life of the campus. This negative image is important in that public Research I institutions are increasingly funded based on the numbers of students they enroll. This reality, coupled with the fact that students are becoming more selective about what schools they will attend and are more willing to attend non-traditional college campuses, poses a critical challenge for Research I campuses. The findings of this study show clearly that the respondent high school counselors, while rating the flagship high on factors related to its research excellence, were not convinced that these same faculty provided adequate support to the learning experiences of undergraduate students.

The finding that counselors rated undergraduate research opportunities, athletic programs, diversity of students, extracurricular activities, social life and prestige of the degree as least important in college selection reveals a critical bias in their attitude toward this flagship institution. These college choice factors represent broad areas in which Carnegie Research I institutions are generally viewed to excel (Boyer, 1998). In fact, many Research I institutions across the nation view themselves as offering undergraduates a "value added" education based on these and other similar factors. Yet, the findings of this study show that these high school counselors view personal service to students and economic considerations to be more important than the "value added" opportunities inherent in attending a Research I institution.

These rankings are of particular concern in that a large proportion of the counselors who rated this institution low on the helpfulness and accessibility of faculty appeared to be very familiar with the campus. A large majority of them (86%) work at high schools located within a short distance of the campus and more than half (64%)

report visiting the campus for professional reasons fairly frequently. In addition, the farther counselors' high schools were located from the flagship campus, the lower they ranked factors related to campus size. In short, these findings suggest that a group of these high school counselors may well be steering students away from attending this flagship campus because they believe it is too large and unresponsive to undergraduate student needs. While the ratings of high school counselors with personal experience attending the flagship are somewhat higher than those who graduated from other schools, the difference was not as great as might be expected from fully satisfied alumni. This should be of concern to this campus not only because of the individual educational experience of these alumni, but also because of the potential impact these alumni now have regarding the opinions of prospective students and their parents. The results of this study demonstrate that this campus may be challenged to balance competing internal priorities to ensure an enriching experience for undergraduate students. In addition, however, it must increasingly be concerned about the perceptions of that student experience among external constituents. These are challenges that this institution likely shares with other Research I campuses.

Collectively, these findings highlight the need for Research I institutions to think about their image in two markets with conflicting values. On one hand, Research I institutions must be concerned with a scholarly market which involves attracting prolific faculty, generating research grant dollars and building endowments. On the other hand, however, they must also regard prospective undergraduate students and the groups which influence them as an equally important market. What remains to be seen is whether Research I institutions can be viewed favorably in both.

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Table One: Rank Ordered Means of Individual College Choice Factors and Research I Ratings compared to other Campuses

College Choice Factors	Mean Importance of Individual Choice Factors	Research I Ratings Compared to Other Campuses
Quality of Undergraduate Education	4.58	3.66
Quality of Faculty	4.46	3.34
Tuition	4.42	2.77
Accessibility and Helpfulness of Faculty	4.39	2.81
Accessibility and Helpfulness of Staff	4.19	3.08
Class Size	4.13	2.25
Variety of Majors	4.10	4.28 (1st)
Job Opportunities	4.08	3.39
Graduate/Professional School Preparation	3.97	4.27 (2nd)
Admission Standards	3.91	3.25
Location	3.86	3.62
In-state v. out-of-state	3.74	
Work Opportunities while in school	3.65	3.52
National Reputation	3.55	4.02 (3rd)
Involvement in Leadership Opportunities	3.52	2.89
Large v. Small Campus	3.47	2.79
Prestige of the Degree	3.46	3.94 (4th)
Social Life	3.17	3.07
Extracurricular Activities	3.09	3.35
Diversity of Students	3.07	3.51
Athletic Programs	2.94	3.75
Undergraduate Research Opportunities	2.90	3.83 (5th)

Table Two
Mean Ratings of Factors

Factors	Mean Importance Rating of College Choice Factors	Mean Rating of Research I campus compared to others
Quality and Responsiveness of Personnel	4.42	3.21
Economic Considerations	4.03	3.33
Size	3.85	2.51
Research I Indicators	3.60	3.81
Extracurricular/ Social Opportunities	3.27	3.24

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Appendix A
Individual Survey Items Comprising Each Factor

	Factor Label	Loadings From Rotated Component Matrix
Factor 1	Quality and Responsiveness of Personnel	
	Quality of Undergraduate Education	.736
	Quality of Faculty	.851
	Accessibility and Helpfulness of Faculty	.786
	Accessibility and Helpfulness of Staff	.736
Factor 2	Research I Indicators	
	Variety of Majors	.393
	National Reputation	.832
	Undergraduate Research Opportunities	.575
	Diversity of Students	.474
	Prestige of the Degree	.776
Factor 3	Extracurricular/Social Opportunities	
	Involvement and Leadership Opportunities	.553
	Extracurricular Activities	.805
	Social Life	.776
	Athletic Programs	.558
Factor 4	Economic Considerations	
	Work Opportunities in School	.658
	Location of Campus	.838
	Tuition	.679
Factor 5	Size	
	Class Size	.768
	Large Campus versus Small Campus	.703